

The Disruptive Union, 1890-1900 in a Hebridean Presbytery

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In the early part of the nineteenth century the island of Lewis had four parish churches. By the close of 1900 thirty six congregations met on the island. Mission and church extension accounted for some of this increase yet most can be explained by church division. The Disruption and the Free Presbyterian schism were responsible for some of the increase along with the division that resulted from the Union of 1900.

At the start of the nineteenth century the Lewis parish ministers, like many other ministers in the highlands, were responsible for extensive and demanding parishes. They also had to contend with the unyielding barriers of topography and climate in order to ensure a measure of religious provision for the islands many villages. As a result of these difficulties many areas remained for long periods without religious services and thus were vulnerable to the forceful appeal of itinerant evangelical preachers. The Revivals which followed their preaching, along with the work of evangelical teachers, catechists and elders shaped the religious expectations of the people. The island's proprietors also adopted a policy of appointing evangelical ministers and this popular movement was thus largely contained within the Established Church. It then moved into the Free Church in 1843. The Free Church achieved a remarkable dominance in Lewis after the Disruption and sustained this throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Lewis had six Free Church congregations in 1843 and towards the end of the century this had increased to twelve.

This commanding position that the Free Church held in the Isle of Lewis was challenged in October 1900. The occasion was the Union between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church to form the United Free Church. The central question that will be addressed in this study is, why did the Lewis people desert their ministers in 1900 and remain outside the Union. In 1899 the Free Church in Lewis

claimed over 13,000 members and adherents over the age of 18. One estimate put the number of those connected with the Lewis Free Church at 19,881 at the beginning of the 1890s.¹ In October 1900, the best part of two of the smaller congregations joined the United Free Church. A further 600 people, scattered throughout the island made a similar commitment. This left a clear majority with the Free Church. At this time Lewis Free Church had twelve ministers and only one remained with the Free Church. He was, however, soon joined by a second Lewis minister who reconsidered his initial commitment to Union.

In the attempt to explain why a group of people followed a particular course historians can often feel at a disadvantage. For the participants the reasons were often deeply personal involving factors such as family background, village traditions or other loyalties. From a distance these reasons are often not accessible to the historian. However, few decisions are made on the basis of one reason and to explain the action of groups and communities historians can legitimately look beyond personal reasons in order to identify a motivation which the people hold in common. This might not be the reason that was uppermost in the mind of each participant but it provides an explanation that those involved would still subscribe to and by which their common action can be explained.

At times historical records provide an insight into the personal reasons that motivated individuals. These are fascinating but their very nature of being profoundly personal render them unsuitable for describing community action. Thus, in asking the question why the Lewis people remained Free Church I am not convinced that the explanation offered here will represent the main personal reason for all the participants. I am, however, convinced it explains satisfactorily the collective action of the Lewis people.

So, why did the Lewis people remain outside the Union? The answer to this question has little to do with theology. At this time in the highlands, people holding the same theological views can be found in the Free Church, United Free Church, Free Presbyterian Church and the Established Church. Rev. Allan MacKenzie, Inverness and Uig,

¹ R. Howie, *The Churches and the Churchless in Scotland* (Glasgow, 1893), 47.

was described as that “notorious weather-cock of the late nineteenth century”² after moving from the Free Church to the Free Presbyterian Church to the Established Church within the space of a few years. He was not alone in this. More specifically, in 1900, we find people of similar theological views going in different directions. As their theology was held in common this cannot be used to explain their divergence. We need to look beyond their theological views in order to explain their action.

The answer to this question also has little to do with being a highlander or speaking Gaelic. It is undeniable that the constitutionalists who formed the Free Church after 1900 were predominantly highland and Gaelic speaking, but many more from this region joined the United Free Church. Both constitutionalism and pro-union sentiment were firmly rooted in the highland church and had the support of Gaelic speakers. Thus, the language and the region, quite properly, cannot be employed as an explanation for only one of these developments. It is difficult to argue that one development, constitutionalism, was indigenous, and that pro-union sentiment was imported and alien. The reverse has, of course, been argued by United Free commentators at the turn of the century.³ It is, therefore, difficult to sustain the argument that there was an exclusive correlation between Gaelic-speaking highlanders and Free Church constitutionalism

The answer to this question certainly has nothing to do with the clan/chief legacy in the highland soul. Attempts have been made to explain the events of 1900 with reference to the above. My own view is that this is nonsense. It has been argued that as a result of the historic kin-based loyalty of the clan system, highlanders were more easily led in matters of religion as ministers usurped the role formerly held by clan chiefs. This argument is more often employed to explain the action of the minority in 1900. Church of Scotland apologists used a similar argument to explain Free Church loyalty in 1843. In 1900, most highland Free Church members and ministers joined the United Free

² *Highland News*, 9 January 1901.

³ K. MacDonald, *The Social and Religious Life in the Highlands*, (Edinburgh, 1902), see chapters 13-15.

Church. Who was, therefore, being easily led? In Lewis the ministers went into the United Free Church, most of the Lewis people ignored their advice and stayed Free Church. As an explanation for the events of 1900, the atavistic model of clan-chief loyalty is of questionable relevance.

Equally, this division cannot be satisfactorily explained by claiming that Free Church people were narrow-minded, backward-looking and stubborn. Nor, alternatively, by arguing that they were upright and saintly and had a better grasp of spiritual things. The earlier accounts understandably portrayed the participants as acting out of flawed motives or integrity depending on the position of the writer. Such accounts provide more insight into the writers' views than an accurate assessment of those being written about. To ascribe pure motives to one group at the expense of the other is going much further than the evidence or sound judgement will allow.

Following the Union, church histories were partisan. The Free Church stressing their loyalty to Disruption principles and the United Free emphasising the benefits of union along with their continuity with an evangelical past. The Free Presbyterian writers laid claim to the same evangelical past yet considered the post 1900 Free Church as still being unsatisfactory.⁴ To an extent both of the smaller denominations have held to the views of their earlier commentators. The United Free merged with the Church of Scotland in 1929 and the question of why a handful of highland ministers remained Free Church in 1900 consequently lost something of its impact as did the necessity of establishing continuity between the United Free and the Disruption. This is reflected in the writing of church history that has emerged from the Church of Scotland in this century.

This is an area of Scottish church history that remains to be explored by historians who would contend that social and economic forces shaped religious belief and church preference. As yet Smout,

⁴ The following texts represent the positions of the denominations referred to: A. Stewart and J. Kennedy-Cameron, *The Free Church of Scotland, The Crisis of 1900* (Edinburgh 1900); *A History of the Free Presbyterian Church*, (Inverness, 1933), ed. D. Beaton; K. MacDonald, *Social and Religious Life*.

Devine, Brown and others have moved quickly over this area with little comment.⁵ A convincing explanation emphasising social and economic forces in the highlands in 1900 remains without both articulation and supporters. It is, indeed, curious that the Union of 1900 in the highlands is a comparatively neglected area by social and economic historians. This is in marked contrast to their enthusiasm for wading into the Disruption and describing it as class conflict with, in some cases, an absence of evidence that is quite startling for historians who have been known to lay claim to a more refined understanding of the importance of evidence in historical enquiry.

Divisions in the Free Church

The Union of the Free Church and the United Presbyterians took place in October 1900. This event was preceded by much discussion and debate in the Scottish highlands and islands. The 1890s, however, was not the first time that union had been considered by these two churches. In the 1860s and early 1870s the Free Church and the United Presbyterians explored the possibility of union. Although the Free Church was founded on the establishment principle (state support for religion) and Chalmers had stated that those who had left the establishment in 1843 would be willing to return to a pure establishment, in practice they were a voluntary church. Not surprisingly, many in the Free Church found that they had much in common with their voluntary partner.

Union negotiations took place between the two denominations from 1863-73. During this period many in the Free Church relaxed their commitment to establishment as a fundamental principle of the Free Church. This move was accelerated when, in 1874, the Church of Scotland abolished patronage and the Free Church gave its support to the disestablishment campaign. This reinforced the Free Church's drift away from holding to the necessity of state support for religion.

⁵ C. Brown, *The People in the Pews, Religion and Society in Scotland Since 1780*, (Economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1993), T. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War, The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester, 1994), T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People, 1830-1950* (London, 1987).

In this period, 1863-73, there was considerable opposition to the perceived dilution of Free Church principles and the proposed merger with another denomination. Although the majority voted for union, a significant minority in the Free Church opposed union with the United Presbyterians and defended the principles upon which they believed the Free Church was founded. They maintained that union required the relaxation of certain Free Church principles and they considered that sacrificing their principles or leaving them as "open questions" was too great a price to pay for ecclesiastical union. This minority in the Free Church who were opposed to union regarded the questions at stake of sufficient importance to justify the extreme course of separation. The anti-unionists believed that the church should remain committed to a belief in the state connection. In addition there were a number of other areas of doctrine and practice that they felt were under threat in the changing church of the late nineteenth century.

As the majority in the Free Church found themselves confronted with a second Disruption, they backed down. It had become apparent by 1873 that the union contemplated could only be brought about at the cost of division within the Free Church itself. Thus the painful consequence of further division resulting from union caused the majority to retreat and suggest alternatively the mutual eligibility of Free Church and United Presbyterian ministers to each other's churches.

The initial opposition to union was not simply a highland phenomenon. It found support in a variety of regions in Scotland. When the pro-union majority backed down, anti-unionism was found throughout Scotland. When union was again being considered in the 1890s, anti-unionism had become a highland phenomenon. In less than twenty years the anti-union impulse had been marginalised to the highland and island parishes.

The pressures for change in the church were many and varied in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A number of areas of Christian belief and practice were being challenged by new ways of thinking. The Free Church was not immune to these pressures and the collective consequence was the emergence of a new religious mood within the Free Church. This new mood meant that many new ways of thinking

were accommodated within the late nineteenth-century Free Church. This change in the tone and temper of Scottish piety resulted in what has been described by Professor Alex Cheyne as a “depuritanisation”.⁶ It was a “less straight-jacketed, less-censorious, more broad-minded way of life for which they stood”.⁷

In many of the highland parishes this new mood was resisted and the forces for change were less welcome. By 1890 many Free Church people in the north were aware of the changes in theology, confession, scripture and worship and were firmly persuaded that these changes had no place in the Free Church as they knew it.

Marginalisation of the Highland Free Church

In 1895 when Rev. Peter MacDonald was leaving St Columba's, Edinburgh to go to Stornoway Gaelic Free Church he was honoured with a farewell breakfast in Edinburgh. At this impressive gathering of eminent gentlemen a number of speeches were made praising MacDonald. Rev. Dr White of St George's Free, Edinburgh said that “what the Highlands required was the right men moved into the right place”.⁸ How should we understand this statement? It could be considered as the benign hope that the highlands would benefit from a high quality of spiritual leadership or alternatively it could be regarded as a policy to deliver the pacification of the anti-unionists. This would ensure that union could be achieved with minimal losses. The growing perception in the highlands favoured the latter interpretation.

Even initiatives that were for the purpose of extending the work of the Church in the highlands were viewed with deep suspicion. By the 1890s the work of the Highland Committee fell within this category. It was seen by some as a vehicle of the advanced party in the church. The Free Church Highland Committee had been set up in 1849. It consisted of ministers chosen triennially from different parishes with Robert Rainy, Convenor in the 1890s and Alexander Lee as Secretary. Among

⁶ A. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk, Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution*, (Edinburgh, 1983), 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸ *Northern Chronicle*, 3 July 1895.

some constitutionalists the Highland Committee had a poor reputation. It was seen as working contrary to the interests of highland Christianity and subversive of highland spirituality.

In 1894, following the Free Presbyterian secession from the Free Church, Rev. Alexander Lee, left his church at Nairn and was appointed as the visiting agent of the Highland Committee. This was a full time appointment and came with a salary of £500.⁹ In addition, Rev. John MacKay, Cromarty, resigned from his church to become a highland evangelist. MacKay was appointed by Rainy and his salary was only £70 per annum. The assembly of 1894 also set aside Rev. William Ross, Cowcaddens and Rev. J MacPherson, Findhorn, to train highland missionaries. These lay missionaries were appointed by the Highland Committee, were trained in Glasgow and sent to work in the highlands to consolidate the work of the Free Church in that region. The missionaries were trained in Glasgow in June and July, they were paid by the Highland Committee and were under the direction of Lee. This training by Ross and MacPherson continued for a few years, then it was decided to send the agents through a regular training course at a Bible Institute in Glasgow.¹⁰

This was a new departure and aroused a measure of suspicion. It was felt by some that godly old catechists and missionaries were being replaced by these new missionaries under Lee's command.¹¹ Catechists had previously trained under ministerial supervision in the highlands and not been exposed to the "questionable" teachings of Edinburgh and Glasgow. They were also paid less. Coming so soon after the secession of 1893 this development seemed like a poorly concealed attempt to influence the outcome of events by getting the Free Church in the highlands to conform to the predominant ethos.

If the training and commissioning of these lay missionaries was viewed with suspicion, the appointment and activity of Lee as travelling agent of the Highland Committee was viewed with contempt. Archibald

⁹ *Northern Chronicle*, 20 June 1894.

¹⁰ *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1898*, Report of the Committee for the Highlands and Islands (Edinburgh, 1898), 4.

¹¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 20 June 1894.

MacNeilage, a leading Free Church elder described Lee as “Rainy’s hench-man”¹² and MacAskill of Dingwall, although eventually going into the Union, was no less critical. MacAskill regarded the appointment of Lee as a piece of “gross ecclesiastical jobbery”. MacAskill continued, describing it as “part of the spirit of favouritism which prevailed in the church” and added, “for a man who served his party, some niche had to be found”.¹³ The highland press in the 1890s and particularly in 1900 and 1901 were seldom without a letter critical of Lee.

Along with being appointed as the full time secretary of the Highland Committee, Lee was also considered for the job of superintendent of the Home Mission Committee. This was also regarded as an unsuitable and unnecessary choice. One letter described the partisan mood behind this appointment. “He is now recognised as one of the party’s (Rainy’s) leaders in the North and in the present divided state of the church, would it not be more desirable to have an entirely neutral gentlemen filling the offices of superintendent of the Highland Committee and Home Mission?”.¹⁴ Presbyteries were invited to suggest what duties the superintendent of the Home Mission Committee should have. At a meeting of the Dingwall Free Church Presbytery in February 1893 they surveyed the highland parishes and concluded there was no need for such an appointment. What emerged was a statement of ecclesiastical independence. They were managing fine and “in their case home-rule was perfectly defensible”. No “bishop” was needed to lord it over them. The message was clear there was nothing to superintend.

The Dingwall Presbytery were confident that if this appointment was put to a plebiscite in the Highlands not one in ten would give support to Lee. Some Highland presbyteries did welcome this appointment. Dingwall dismissed this with a very obvious astronomical reference. “Jupiter nodded and the minor planets began to revolve at his bidding”. The Dingwall presbytery surveyed all the highland

¹² *Highland News*, 19 January 1901.

¹³ *Highland News*, 2 June 1894.

¹⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 20 January 1893.

presbyteries and concluded that there was no need for a superintendent. They asked "where then was the work in the highlands that necessitated the appointment of such an official?". Thus the motion asserting that there was no need for a superintendent of Home Mission was unanimously carried by Dingwall presbytery.¹⁵

The view was expressed frequently that the Highland Committee was serving the purposes of the Free Church establishment and ignoring the highland people. Ten years before the Union, before Lee's appointment and the lay missionaries, a Free Church highland elder complained that the Highland Committee was dealing badly with probationers, students and missionaries. The result of this "tyranny" was that the Free Church in the highlands was being deprived of her best sons and the Highland Committee was encouraging men for the ministry in the highlands that were quite unsuitable.¹⁶ Many saw the Highland Committee as a tool of Rainy and Lee, reflecting their interests and not those of the north.

Mr Donald MacLean, minister of Moy and later principal of the Free Church College, also agreed with this assessment. While writing a short biographical sketch of Rev. John Noble he said "the influence of the ruling power in the church tended to crush the efforts of a minority struggling to maintain their right of choice in the calling of a minister. Probationers, whose views on current questions of policy and creed do not coincide with those of the prevailing party, found the access to vacant congregations sometimes awkwardly barred by the influence of interim moderators".¹⁷ This situation was further compounded as congregations claimed they were sometimes denied the interim moderator of their choice.

The activities of the Highland Committee was not the only complaint of the constitutionalists. Free Church journals were not above suspicion whether in Gaelic or English. The Free Church Gaelic quarterly *Iomradh Air Craomh Sgaoileadh an T-Soisgeul Leis an*

¹⁵ *Inverness Courier*, 17 February 1893.

¹⁶ *Northern Chronicle*, 5 August 1890.

¹⁷ D. MacLean, "A Biographical Sketch of John Noble", in J. Noble, *The Religious Life of Ross* (Edinburgh, 1909), xlix.

Eaglais Shaor was attacked as being contrary to the interests of the highland constitutionalists. There were complaints that this Gaelic quarterly contained the views of the advanced party in the Free Church and was contrary to views held by highland evangelicals.¹⁸ Another Gaelic Free Church journal *An Fhianuis*, the Witness, was described in the pages of the *Highland News* as containing “one-sided statements”.¹⁹

The Free Church Machine

The sense of anger and disappointment that some highland Free Church people felt can be obtained by reading the letters to highland newspapers in the 1890s. The feeling of many in the highlands, both those who entered the Union and those who stayed out was that the Free Church machine had effectively marginalised anti-union constitutionalism. This group were now cast adrift within their own denomination. A denomination which they believed passionately had come into being based on certain principles which were now, at best, of rapidly declining relevance.

It was a predicament that was considered worse than the Disruption by some. Highland Christians were feeling progressively isolated within the Free Church. They felt it was being managed and controlled from Edinburgh. Wherever they turned they saw evidence of this; in the Assembly, the Colleges, appointments, committees and journals all conspired against the constitutionalists. In 1890 following the Assembly debate on Dods and Bruce, one commentator asserted that highland Christians were “at the greatest struggle which has taken place in this country since the civil and ecclesiastical tyranny of the Stuarts was brought to an end in 1688”.²⁰

Following the union discussions of 1863-73, Dr Robert Buchanan observed that “death will have a good deal to do among us before the set time for union comes”.²¹ This was undeniably true. Many who had resisted union in the 1870s had died by the 1890s, but along with death

¹⁸ *Northern Chronicle*, 16 July 1890.

¹⁹ *Highland News*, 1 September 1900.

²⁰ *Northern Chronicle*, 4 June 1890

²¹ G.N.M. Collins, *Principal John MacLeod* (Edinburgh, 1951), 33.

can be added the relentless operation of the Free Church machine.

For many of those in the highland Free Church, Rainy unfairly exploited his power and position within the Free Church. In his defence it could be argued that where union was concerned his options were limited. As the mood of the Free Church was pro-union, Rainy was obliged to secure this as smoothly as possible with minimal dissent.

From the point of view of the highlanders favouring union there was nothing underhand. They could see no strong reasons against union. They argued that it was all misrepresentation and mischief making. Highlanders should have been more at home following Rainy into the union but were being misled by a lowland agenda. MacDonald referred to "misrepresentation made to simple minded people by those who ought to know better".²² From this point of view the source of the trouble was James Begg and those who followed him. From the pro-union highland point of view Rainy had no case to answer. He was simply endeavouring consistently to guide the Free Church with the consensus yet defuse the influence of troublemakers at the same time.

Rainy's outstanding abilities as a churchman and the constraints within which he operated did not entirely impress northern constitutionalists. For them he had control of the centres of influence in the Free Church and used them consistently for the advancement of one group and the marginalisation of the other. From this perspective Rainy's actions were regarded as an abuse of power and privilege.

The Secession of 1893

The Declaratory Act provided a focus for the discontent of highland constitutionalists in the 1890s. The aim of the Declaratory Act was to clarify the church's relation to the Westminster Confession. It was proposed as a necessary step which would better reflect the changing mood in the Free Church. In 1891 the Declaratory Act was sent to presbyteries of the Free Church as an overture under the Barrier Act. This act was devised to prevent any sudden alteration or innovation in either doctrine, worship or discipline. Any piece of legislation under the Barrier Act had to be remitted to the presbyteries of the church and

²² K. MacDonald, *Social and Religious Life*, 241.

reported on at the following Assembly. In 1892 a majority of the Free Church voted in favour of the Declaratory Act.

The controversy surrounding the Declaratory Act divided opinion within the Free Church in the highlands. They divided on the question of whether the Declaratory Act was perceived to be a relieving or imposing act. Those who strongly opposed the Declaratory Act regarded it as an imposing act which changed the principles upon which the Free Church was based and thereby altered the standards to which ministers and elders subscribed. For those who considered the Declaratory Act a relieving act the basic principles of the Free Church remained unchanged and office bearers could continue to believe as they had always done. Greater latitude, however, was now available for any who might entertain scruples concerning certain points in the Westminster Confession.

Constitutionalists can be found on both sides of this divide. There is no exclusive correlation between constitutionalism and the view that the Declaratory Act was an imposing act. It is possible to say that all who saw the Declaratory Act as an imposing act were constitutionalists but it did not follow that all constitutionalists regarded the Declaratory Act as an imposing act. In addition, there were Free Church people in the highlands who took the view that the Declaratory Act was a relieving act but still remained convinced that it had no place in the Free Church.

The reaction to the Declaratory Act resulted in meetings being organised and statements of opposition being issued. There were a number within the Free Church, however, who were looking for more decisive and radical action than was being discussed by meetings in the summer of 1892. This was provided in November 1892 when nine students signed a bond stating that “as the Declaratory Act is now an integral part of the constitution of the Free Church, we, the undersigned, have ceased to prosecute our studies with a view to the ministry of that church as now constituted”.²³ One of the nine was John MacLeod, was later to become principal of Free Church College, but in 1893 he was urging Free Church members to “cut their connection with

²³ G.N.M. Collins, *Principal John MacLeod*, 36.

an apostate church".²⁴ His advice was being adopted by Free Church elders in the highlands and islands who were organising meetings of protest. Many of these resulted in the agreement that if the Declaratory Act was not repealed in 1893 then they would sever their links with the Free Church.

Constitutionalists were not a homogenous group and this became painfully apparent at a conference in Inverness in February 1893. Despite the fact that both ministers and elders had gathered from many parts of the highlands and islands, the decision was taken to have a ministers only session. The ministers who attended said this had been the original intention. The elders, however, did not share this view. Many had travelled considerable distances to attend and this decision created a degree of bad feeling. It was a most uncharacteristic step given the normal composition of presbyterian courts. Yet, various regional elders meetings had shown their strength of feeling and if ministers were at all nervous about being committed to secession they needed to find a way of limiting the influence of highland elders. Thus a ministers only session went ahead and accepted the position that had previously been taken by meetings in Inverness and Glasgow. They agreed that the Declaratory Act was contrary to present Free Church belief and practice and that it changed Free Church principles. The question of separation, however, was not considered necessary. They ruled that the Declaratory Act was not a binding or imposing act but a relieving act.

At this point, February 1893, the hope of united constitutionalist opposition to the Declaratory Act received a major set back. In Inverness, ministers decided not to allow elders to participate in a convention and then decided that the Declaratory Act was not binding but was a relieving act for those with confessional scruples. The ministers agreed that the Declaratory Act did not impose beliefs on those who belonged to the Free Church.²⁵

This apparent collapse of opposition was viewed with amazement by those in the Free Church who had listened to the stirring speeches of

²⁴ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 February 1893.

²⁵ *Inverness Courier*, 3 March 1893; *Northern Chronicle*, 29 March 1893.

ministers who had now qualified their position when disruption appeared as an imminent possibility. Principal MacLeod commented that "here was the point at which the friends of the church expected decisive action on the part of their leaders. A disruption was looked upon as inevitable. The people were doomed to disappointment."²⁶ In the remaining years of this decade a number of letters expressing this sense of betrayal can be found in the highland press. These events would also have let Free Church leaders know that a significant secession of constitutionalist clergy at the 1893 Assembly was unlikely.

The position which was adopted at the Inverness meeting in February, however, did not weaken the resolve of Free Church elders. In the following months a number of meetings, mostly led by elders, were held in Skye and on the mainland to declare opposition to the Declaratory Act. The highland press reported on a number of such meetings in March, April and May 1893. They frequently concluded by committing themselves to leave the Free Church unless the Declaratory Act was repealed at the 1893 Assembly. This was done in the knowledge that their ministers were unlikely to go with them. One group of Skye elders stated that "the constitutionalist ministers were evidently afraid to lead the people out of a church which has so manifestly backslided from the truth. They were to be greatly blamed for the way in which they had acted at the Inverness conference in not allowing the elders, who came from different parts, to take part in the proceedings".²⁷

A number of overtures for the repeal of the Declaratory Act received little attention at the 1893 Free Church Assembly. However, the students and elders who had adopted the more militant position were not totally abandoned of ministerial support as they had feared. At this Assembly, Rev. Donald MacFarlane, who had recently moved from Kilmallie to Raasay, protested and severed his connection with the Free Church. Following this, MacFarlane began immediately to consolidate Free Church dissent. He travelled to Glasgow where he addressed a group of sympathetic students, then to Greenock and on to

²⁶ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 February 1893.

²⁷ *Northern Chronicle*, 29 March 1893.

the Cowal peninsula where the Millhouse/Kames congregation left the Free Church. MacFarlane then placed an advert in the *Northern Chronicle*²⁸ announcing that a secession meeting would be held in the Inverness Music Hall on 13 June 1893. At this meeting MacFarlane was joined by Rev. Donald MacDonald, Shielraig and a number of elders and students. They produced a Bond of Union and this served as the basis of the Free Presbyterian Church. In January 1894 eviction notices were served by the presbyteries of Lochcarron and Skye on MacDonald and MacFarlane. In addition, £280 was arrested at the Lochcarron branch of the Caledonian Bank. This included money which MacDonald's congregation had put aside for a new church as well as personal gifts.

The first two ministers licensed by the new church were John MacKay and Allan MacKenzie. MacKay took over the Gairloch congregation and MacKenzie, Inverness. MacKenzie pointed out in a letter to a newspaper that those who seceded had other grievances along with the Declaratory Act. He argued "it was not alone the Declaratory Act that led him and his friends to assume the position they had taken up. The purport of the act was the legalisation of the backslidings that had characterised the past twenty years of the Free Church; the errors of the past were not only condoned by it, but made legal and as no errors or departure from the original standpoint".²⁹

Those who seceded held that if they remained in the Free Church they would have to accept these backslidings in worship and doctrine. They quit because, in their view, the church they belonged to was no longer the church they had joined. In order to remain loyal to their beliefs they considered they were now obliged to form a new church to embody the principles that had been contended for in 1843. In a number of highland villages two churches now claimed to have their origin in the Disruption. One was founded in 1843, the other in 1893, yet the latter now claimed to more accurately represent the origins of the former.

In November, 1893 the secession announced that their movement in

²⁸ *Northern Chronicle*, 31 May 1893.

²⁹ *Northern Chronicle*, 11 October 1893.

the highlands was progressing rapidly and “already twenty-seven congregation have separate organisations and services”.³⁰ When they met in Inverness in July, 1895, the Free Presbyterians claimed that they had seven ministers, eighteen students, forty missionaries and 20,000 people in connection with the church.³¹ On the other hand the Free Church calculated that the secession amounted to 6,756 elders deacons and communicants above the age of eighteen.³²

Lewis Unsettled

It would appear from presbytery records and press reports that the Lewis Free Church was profoundly unsettled by the 1893 secession. In September 1893, one account spoke of the mood of Free Church members as being “anything but satisfied with the explanations furnished”.³³ Later on that year another presbytery report focused on the Declaratory Act as a source of “irritation and alienation and only for the attachment of the people to their church, and the esteem they have for their spiritual guides, many would have carried their dislike to the act and its supporters to the bitter length of separation”. It was acknowledged that this has “happened already in the case of more than one of the congregations in the island and is likely to happen soon in the whole of them unless the obnoxious act is not repealed”.³⁴

At the beginning of the following year this remained a major concern of the Lewis Free Church. Ministers and elders spoke of dissatisfaction, dispeace and division “almost universally within the bounds of the presbytery”. Consequently, the Lewis Free Church presbytery requested that the Assembly repeal the Declaratory Act and Lewis ministers and elders for their part continued forcefully to denounce the Declaratory Act.³⁵

Some of this disquiet must have been attributable to the preaching of Neil Cameron. In 1893 he travelled throughout the north-west and

³⁰ *Northern Chronicle*, 29 November 1893.

³¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 10 July 1895.

³² *Northern Chronicle*, 27 May 1893.

³³ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 September 1893.

³⁴ *Northern Chronicle*, 13 December 1893.

³⁵ *Northern Chronicle*, 7 January 1894.

the islands explaining the secession. Cameron held meetings throughout Lewis and in Stornoway where over 400 people listened to him in the Drill Hall. At the close of this meeting Rev. Greenfield, Stornoway was most agitated and unable to remain silent. He attempted to address the people in order to counter Cameron's opinions and accused Cameron of misleading the people.³⁶

Rev. Greenfield's attempt to put his view forward at the close of Neil Cameron's meeting in July was perhaps not the best occasion. There were, however, other opportunities to address the Lewis people. There had been some impatience in Lewis that a Free Church deputation of Rev. MacKenzie, Inverness and Rev. Galbraith, Lochalsh, had not arrived to explain the Declaratory Act. In order to meet this need Rev. Hector Cameron, Back and Rev. Greenfield, Stornoway, decided to explain the issues to the Lewis people in September 1893. A press report described Mr Cameron as the "lion of the evening" and the feeling was that "the presbyterian substitutes were as good as could be provided and indeed there would have been dissatisfaction had Mr Cameron, Back, not been heard on the subject".³⁷

The views of the Lewis Free Church Presbytery were put forward on this occasion with over 500 in attendance. Mr Cameron, "speaking from copious notes addressed the meeting for almost two hours". He described how the Declaratory Act had caused him many an anxious hour and sleepless night until he found what he considered to be the right way. Cameron said that he had corresponded widely and discussed with many, but had found no solution until he considered it from the viewpoint of history, "searching the records from the days of the prophets to the Disruption of '43 and this brought rest to his soul". Hector Cameron is reported to have said "through all the history of the church he had failed to find a precedent for the action of the secessionists". As he surveyed the history of the church he could find no support for secession and "no word advising them to secede".³⁸

³⁶ *Northern Chronicle*, 19 July 1893.

³⁷ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 September 1893.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Hector Cameron adopted the view that the Declaratory Act did not impose the belief in or the preaching of heresy. Thus, Cameron sided with the constitutionalists remaining in the Free Church. He agreed that “it was a relieving act, not an imposing act” and that he saw no need to secede “until he was compelled to preach against his conscience”.³⁹ This must have appeared as a disappointment for those constitutionalists favouring secession. Cameron was criticised for his position in letters which argued that the Declaratory Act was an imposing act as it removed from Mr Cameron’s hands the power of exercising discipline, not only in his congregation but also in the presbytery, synod and general assembly. One correspondent explained that “it is an imposing act on the ground that it forbids him (Cameron) to bring a charge of heresy against a heretical teacher, according to his constitutional rights and in consistency with the presbyterian form of church government” Cameron also came in for a measure of criticism for predicting of the Free Church secession that “great shall be the fall of the secessionists”.⁴⁰

A year earlier Cameron had seemed more extreme in his views at the June meeting in Inverness which was convened for the purpose of responding to the Declaratory Act. Cameron, on that occasion, had considered the resolutions of that gathering to be totally inadequate. In the opinion of the *Northern Chronicle* there were “three parties in the meeting, the most extreme of them being led by Mr Cameron, Back, who said he was prepared to go further than the MacAskill party”.⁴¹ Cameron’s comments at this stage would appear to support the *Northern Chronicle*’s views.

In referring to the Declaratory Act, Cameron said “it deeply concerns everyone to know whether he is really found fighting for or against God and his truth by remaining in a church which seems so fast and speedily to be gravitating towards socinianism”.⁴² In the following week’s edition Cameron’s words sounded as if they could be a prelude

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Northern Chronicle*, 11 October 1893.

⁴¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 15 June 1892.

⁴² *Ibid.*

to secession. He claimed that the "function of every church is to witness for the truth of God and when she ceases to discharge that function she is no longer a church of Christ but a synagogue of Satan".⁴³

Some weeks after Cameron and Greenfield put the Free Church interpretation on events, John MacKay, secession minister at Gairloch took over the Stomoway Drill Hall in order to explain the principles on which the Free Presbyterians took their stand. MacKay argued that the Declaratory Act was not the only problem but it legalised the backslidings of the last twenty years in the Free Church. With the Declaratory Act, purity of worship was lost and doctrinal errors were being allowed to exist. Although Free Presbyterian organisation was slow in achieving formal structures in Lewis there was strong and wide support. At the end of MacKay's meeting he provided a number of names in Lewis and invited people to communicate with these individuals.⁴⁴

Lewis Free Presbyterians

As had been feared this unsettled mood eventually resulted in division in Lewis congregations. The main gatherings of Free Presbyterians were in Stomoway, North Tolsta, Achmore, Breasclete and Skigersta. References can also be found to gatherings in Point and Crossbost.⁴⁵ This is a remarkable response considering that the Lewis Free Church had been somewhat removed from the main events and influences.

The movement of the people from the Free Church to the Free Presbyterian Church appears to have taken place as a slow process rather than a sudden event. A slow process that was encouraged by the frequent visits and lecture tours of mainland seceders and by key meetings in the churches. When Stomoway Free Presbyterians held their first communion in September 1894 a number of Free Church people came over for the first time. At this communion, Donald MacDonald, Shildaig, Allan MacKenzie, Inverness and Neil Cameron,

⁴³ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 June 1892.

⁴⁴ *Northern Chronicle*, 11 October 1893.

⁴⁵ *Highland News*, 23 September 1899.

Glasgow, officiated.

An account in January 1895 describes the Stornoway congregation as active and organised. "The facts with regard to the seceders in Stornoway are as follows ... we have regular services every Sabbath – forenoon, afternoon and evening. Occasionally the afternoon service is dispensed with, but the forenoon never since we started. We are excellently ministered to by either of the following laymen, Mr Alexander MacIver, Ranish, Mr Alexander MacIver, Sandwick, Mr William Lees, Stornoway, Mr Alexander Ross, Stornoway and Mr Murdo MacKenzie, Laxdale". In addition "the Stornoway congregation had three weekly prayer meetings".⁴⁶ The *Highland News*, which did not care for church disputes acknowledged that there were seceders in every parish in Lewis and a "vigorous congregation which meets in the Drill Hall in Stornoway".⁴⁷ This vigorous congregation was given a site in Stornoway by Lady Matheson in December 1895. The site was at the upper end of Scotland Street in Stornoway. The church building was completed in 1899.

There is some evidence that the Declaratory Act was not the only cause of secession in 1893. In the parish of Back where Hector Cameron was Free church minister it has been suggested by Donald MacDonald that pre-existing divisions in the congregation contributed to the Free Presbyterian schism and that a measure of mismanagement by the parish minister helped this. MacDonald says that Cameron was "blamed by many for the secession of 1893. This split had little to do with the Declaratory Act. Young office bearers were elected and older members were overlooked, at the same time a number of Free Church students who were in Lewis are reported to have fostered the unrest".⁴⁸

The Free Presbyterian Church in this area came into existence in Tolsta in December 1894. The sacrament was dispensed in North Tolsta Free Presbyterian church for the first time in October 1895. This was immediately following the opening of the new church.

There is also a reference to a Stornoway dispute but the sources

⁴⁶ *Northern Chronicle*, 16 January 1895.

⁴⁷ *Highland News*, 4 August 1894.

⁴⁸ D. MacDonald, *The Tolsta Townships*, (Stornoway, 1984), 59.

contain no detailed explanation. The press reported that Alexander MacIver, Sandwick, attended the secession communion in Stornoway in 1894. The comment was made that "his appearance among them did not, as had been alleged arise from any differences that had cropped up between him and any members of the Free Church". MacIver denies this and states that he was joining those who follow the truth. Unfortunately this does not tell us what the alleged dispute was about nor if it had been the cause of MacIver's secession.⁴⁹

Achmore was another area in Lewis which developed strong Free Presbyterian connections. The reasons for the schism are not easy to pin down. There were letters to the highland press arguing that the Achmore secession had nothing to do with the Declaratory Act. One report claimed that "all the people here have seceded except a few land-leaguers".⁵⁰ Following their secession they complained that the Free Church dominated school board were denying them access to the local school for the purpose of worship. However, access was eventually granted after repeated appeals.

The Achmore secession was further confused by a correspondent who wrote to the *Highland News* claiming that the Achmore secession had nothing to do with the Declaratory Act. The reason for their secession, it was alleged, was that "Mr MacInnes, their spiritual adviser, heard that Dr Rainy had issued a pamphlet in which he had stated that man is the descendant of a cross breed between the gorilla and the reynard". Therefore, man could not be held accountable for Adam's sin. Apparently, MacInnes denounced Rainy and his doctrine and "at once set about establishing a congregation of his own". He was helped in this by a Mr MacDonald. The Achmore people were, therefore, told to avoid Rainy and his teachings.⁵¹

This anonymous critic of the Achmore secession was also critical of the Achmore leaders. He said "your readers also should know that only a few weeks previous to the disruption in Achmore the names of some of the now leading secessionists headed a petition sent to Lady

⁴⁹ *Northern Chronicle*, 5 September 1894.

⁵⁰ *Highland News*, 1 August 1894.

⁵¹ *Highland News*, 21 July 1894.

Matheson's factor for the removal from the township for misbehaviour of the very person whom they have now chosen as their guide in spiritual matters".⁵²

In Harris, theories of evolution, along with the Declaratory Act were also cited as a cause of secession. The strength of the Harris secession was quite remarkable given their relative isolation from the main events of the secession. When MacFarlane called the meeting in June 1893 in the Inverness Music Hall to consolidate the secession, the Harris Free Church did not attend but sent a telegram with a simple request, "Deputation wanted to enlighten Harris on Declaratory Act". Enlightenment arrived by some means as it was reported in the following year that there were seven secession congregations in Harris with an estimated 1400 adults attached to the church. Another report refers to a secession communion in Harris to which over 1000 attended. This strength of support was not without a measure of bad feeling between Harris people and on one occasion a tent, erected for a communion, was so badly knifed so as to disrupt the proceedings that alternative accommodation had to be found.⁵³

In September 1893, one report claimed that in Lewis "no actual separation had taken place".⁵⁴ However, this need not indicate that sympathy with the seceders was absent in Lewis. There is also evidence that the Free Church presbytery took prompt action out of concern that the majority of the Ness Free Church congregation might secede. On 3 August 1893 the presbytery held a special session in Ness to "consider the state of matters in our island as regards the action of the secessionists and the steps that should be taken to secure the peace and unity of our congregations".⁵⁵

The Presbytery met with the Ness session and congregation and warned that "any office bearer giving any help or countenance whatever to separatist tactics, subversive of the Free Church was guilty

⁵² *Highland News*, 21 July 1894.

⁵³ *Inverness Courier*, 25 September 1894, *Inverness Courier*, 16 June 1893 & *Northern Chronicle*, 5 September 1894.

⁵⁴ *Northern Chronicle*, 22 September 1893.

⁵⁵ *Minute Book of the Free Church of the Presbytery of Lewis*, (MBFCPL) 8 August 1893; *Inverness Courier*, 11 August 1893.

of ordination vows and liable to be summarily dealt with". One Ness elder, Murdo MacFarlane, had apparently signed the Inverness Bond of Union. He was asked to attend a meeting of presbytery but refused saying he was no longer under their jurisdiction. In his absence he was suspended. The presbytery elicited from the other elders a declaration of loyalty to the Free Church.⁵⁶

At this point the Ness congregation was without a minister. They had a new building which had been completed in 1892 and belonged entirely to the congregation. An attempt had been made to secure one of the secession leaders as the minister of the Ness congregation. The presbytery's prompt action, however, frustrated this scheme. Without the presbytery's hard line on this matter it is possible that the Ness secession could have been much larger.

The ministerial vacuum and itinerant secession activity in Ness was not the only opening for secession in this part of the island. There had been a measure of division under the previous ministry of Mr Duncan MacBeth. The divisions that resulted formed the basis for the Ness secession. MacBeth was called to Ness in 1879 and died in 1891. At times it was a troubled ministry with competing groups operating within the congregation. Angus Smith, writing in *An Eaglais Mhor* suggests that Kenneth MacPherson, school teacher and catechist, who also took services before MacBeth arrived was a central figure in this. There was disagreement over where the new church should be built, at Cross or at Lionel and MacPherson's group seemed to be acting independently of the Deacons' court. MacPherson was holding separate services at Lionel in the morning and evening in competition with the main services of the congregation. All this caused trouble for MacBeth's ministry. Smith links this division with the emergence of the secession at Skigersta. "Precipitate words and actions by these people brought a cleavage about in the congregation which had not the remotest connection with the Free Presbyterians who left in 1892". Following a dispute over the removal of slates and material from the South Dell meeting house for the repair of the Lionel meeting house a group in Ness joined the Free Presbyterians. Smith claimed that they

⁵⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 11 August 1893.

took most of the Skigersta folk with him and relatives of those who had been against MacBeth.⁵⁷

There are a number of reasons that can be advanced to explain why Lewis people and ministers did not join the Free Presbyterians in greater numbers. In the first place joining the Free Presbyterians involved considerable upheaval as it required that Lewis people leave the churches that their families had built and supported. To an extent congregational feuds must have limited schism as one faction was unlikely to join the Free Presbyterians if a former opposing faction had already taken that action. The hostility of ministers to the Declaratory Act must have contributed to limiting secession as the people would have felt united in opposition with their ministers who were remaining in the Free Church and believed that the Declaratory Act would be defeated from within. Poor organisation, lack of information and distance from the main meetings must have limited the number of Lewis people who seceded after 1893. Finally, there is evidence of the quick action and discipline of the Lewis presbytery to crush signs of secession in 1893. These factors, to varying degrees, must have limited the Free Presbyterian schism in Lewis.

The Union of 1900 and the Lewis Presbytery

In May 1900 the Union Committee of the Free Church presented a report which set out the arrangements for union with the United Presbyterians. The minority position was contained in a motion in which Rev. Angus Galbraith disapproved of the committees proposals as they contained provisions which were at variance with and violate the standards of the Free Church. He recommended that no further steps be taken towards union. In this Galbraith was expressing the views of those ministers who had met at Achnasheen earlier that year and had committed themselves to “maintain inviolate the Free Church of Scotland and its testimony, as contained in the Claim, Declaration and Protest of 1842 and the Protest of 1843”.⁵⁸ In May 1899 at an earlier anti-union meeting in Inverness twenty-eight ministers were

⁵⁷ A. Smith, *An Eaglais Mhor* (n.p., n.d.), 33

⁵⁸ Noble, *Religious Life of Ross*, p. lii.

present. There were eight Lewis Free Church elders at this gathering. Hector Cameron, minister of Back, sent his support but could not attend. This conference agreed that the basis of Union “fails to maintain the spiritual doctrines and principles for which the Free Church was called to contend”.⁵⁹ This conference also appointed a committee to defend anti-union views. Hector Cameron, along with six Lewis elders were appointed to this committee.

Despite these efforts the Union of the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church took place on 31 October 1900 and 27 ministers remained outside the Union. The following year a newspaper report claimed that the Free Church had twenty six ministers, ninety two congregations, eighteen agents and fifty preaching stations.⁶⁰ Most of them were found in the highlands and hebrides. Before the Union there were well over 200 Free Church congregations in the highlands. Although predominantly found in the highlands the remaining Free Church congregations were not in the majority in this region.

There had been considerable disturbance in Lewis parishes in the 1890s. Most parishes had been affected to some extent by the Free Presbyterian schism and there had been other unrelated disputes. In the period before 1900 the view was expressed frequently that union would involve Lewis in further conflict. This assessment turned out to be accurate both within the presbytery and among the island’s population.

Within the presbytery the principal contenders were Hector Cameron, minister of Back Free Church and Peter MacDonald, minister of Stornoway Gaelic Free Church. Cameron was opposed to union and MacDonald was in favour of the move towards union. In 1899 and 1900 the Lewis Presbytery engaged in a number of heated debates on union. There is little detail of these exchanges in the presbytery minutes. Discussion was terminated with the enigmatic phrase “prolonged discussion followed”. The highland press, however, frequently supplied a blow by blow account of these painful exchanges.

In one account the *Highland News* reported that the Lewis Free

⁵⁹ *Highland News*, 20 May 1899.

⁶⁰ *Highland News*, 9 March 1901.

Church presbytery had decided in favour of union.⁶¹ This meeting was conducted in Gaelic and commenced with a two hour discourse from Hector Cameron who argued that he was not against union as such but against union with the United Presbyterians on the basis submitted. The presbytery clerk at this point was Rev. Peter MacDonald who asked Cameron provokingly where it says in the Bible that a connection between church and state had to be maintained. MacDonald remained unimpressed with Cameron's claims that he was basing his argument on the testimony of the reformed church. MacDonald said he "respected the testimony of the reformed church but respected the testimony of the Bible more" and continued to insist that Cameron demonstrate from scripture where it says that only a church state connection was acceptable. Cameron complained of interruption and restated his position. As the discussion continued MacDonald was outraged when Cameron claimed that "if he went in with the union in face of the vow he had taken he would be guilty of perjury of the worst kind".⁶²

MacDonald immediately responded with indignation asking if Cameron considered that all ministers who went into the union were guilty of breaking their ordination vows. MacDonald was satisfied, however, when Cameron qualified his comments by saying he was only speaking for himself. As the meeting proceeded to its conclusion, Hector Cameron moved that the presbytery disapprove on union on the basis of the current proposals. MacDonald argued that it was more important to consider what Christ wanted and to ensure that the Word Of God was the only rule of life. He claimed that the Confession would not be mutilated and that the proposed union would safeguard Free Church principles. MacDonald, therefore, suggested that the presbytery approve of the Union proposals and endeavour to keep the people fully informed. After further discussion the Lewis Free Church presbytery decided in favour of union.⁶³

In the following month, February 1899, Peter MacDonald laid this

⁶¹ *Highland News*, 21 January 1899.

⁶² *Highland News*, 21 January 1899.

⁶³ *MBFCPL*, 11 January 1899; *Highland News*, 21 January 1899.

question before his congregation in Stornoway. He spoke warmly of the United Presbyterians and refuted the charge that they were heretics. He claimed that they were of sound doctrine and that scripture and the Confession were secure with them. MacDonald was confident that the Union would take place and that the Free Church would be "better for the Union". It was, therefore, their duty to "pray that wisdom would be given to the joint committee composed of so many godly ministers and elders".⁶⁴

The Lewis Free Church presbytery continued to debate union throughout 1899 and 1900. At a meeting on 28 August 1900 they approached the contentious duty of electing representatives to attend the union assembly in Edinburgh. For the pro-union faction this meeting was a necessary piece of presbytery business. However, for those opposed to union, this involved decisions of much greater consequence. It involved electing representatives to go to Edinburgh to participate in a piece of ecclesiastical business, the outcome of which would be the demise of the Free Church. It is hardly surprising that the meeting failed to be an example of smooth, reasoned, mannerly debate.

This presbytery meeting did not manage to proceed beyond approving the minutes of the previous meeting before it descended into disagreement and recrimination. Cameron claimed that he had been misrepresented in the previous minutes and that he had never agreed to the election of representatives to attend the union assembly.⁶⁵ MacDonald's minutes stated the opposite and he claimed that he had taken the words down from Cameron's lips. The presbytery records do not contain the detail of this debate. The highland press, however, contained a full account of these exchanges which demonstrated Cameron's despair and at times made him look a little foolish.

As well as disputing the accuracy of the previous presbytery minutes Cameron argued that it was beyond the powers of the presbytery to elect ministers to wind up the Church. Cameron was informed that the highest legal authority in the church had been consulted and they had advised that it was in order for presbyteries to

⁶⁴ *Highland News*, 4 February 1899.

⁶⁵ *Highland News*, 1 September 1900.

send representatives to the Union Assembly. Cameron thus found himself disagreeing with most of the Lewis ministers and the views of the Free Church's legal advisers. In refuting their views Cameron could only cling to the phrase "but I know I am right". This claim simply provoked laughter and taunts from fellow ministers who said Cameron was "setting himself up as a higher authority than the legal adviser of the church". This was described as "infallibility to the core". On this occasion the presbytery struggled to complete its business of appointing representatives with Cameron objecting and asking for his dissent to be recorded at every point. Those who wanted to speak appealed to the moderator "for protection to speak without being interrupted by Mr Cameron" and they expressed their weariness with this "non-sensical discussion".⁶⁶

Cameron was further provoked by Dr Ross from Barvas who admitted that he realised in 1893 that the Declaratory Act would lead to union. Ross pointed out that Cameron had submitted to the Declaratory Act and under this had acted as a loyal Free-Churchman for some years. Cameron was outraged by Ross's remarks which he denied and described as "scandalous". Ross's comments, however, provoked Cameron to declare that "if this Union takes place, I will not be a member of the new church".⁶⁷

Public Debate

The meetings of the Lewis Free Church presbytery was not the only forum where people could debate the approaching union. Both parties took the debate to the people and campaigned throughout the island in favour of their position. Both parties invited key speakers from the mainland and both complained about their ecclesiastical opponents importing speakers from without the island.

On 12 September 1900 it was noted in the presbytery records that some ministers who disapproved of union were visiting Lewis congregations. It was suggested that the presbytery "should attend

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

these and have associations".⁶⁸ This particular anti-union deputation consisted of Revs. MacCulloch, Glasgow, Galbraith, Lochalsh, MacDonald, Raasay and Campbell, Creich. On 21 September they arrived in Stornoway and held a service in the Drill Hall. This meeting attracted people from town and country and all shades of religious opinion in the island.

Galbraith was the first to speak. As he commenced his address, Peter MacDonald interrupted and asked if the people could hear both sides of the argument. The chairman at this meeting, MacCulloch, said it was a meeting for those opposed to union. MacDonald then demanded to be heard and despite the chairman telling him to sit down, he continued to speak while others in the meeting were shouting at him to organise another meeting and demanding that he "sit down" or someone should "put him out". The meeting was soon out of control. The chairman was calling for the "protection of the civil powers" and others were appealing for Peter MacDonald to speak. A former Provost of Stornoway blamed these events on the Free Presbyterians. He claimed that "the people making the disturbance are seceders, they have no right here at all".

The journalist to whom we are indebted for this colourful account described the scene at this stage as being "beyond description. Several gentlemen were on their feet speaking at one time and the rough element were howling".⁶⁹

In one corner, Rev. MacAskill, Dingwall, who was speaking and trying to get an audience for himself was exhorted to "allow the people who came here to speak, to do so". MacAskill's quick response was "and who are you?" This gentleman then introduced himself as the Superintendent of Police whose protection others were appealing for. However, Superintendent Smith was informed of the temporal and limited nature of his authority which apparently gave him no right to interfere. MacAskill continued, "I know the authority and power under which you act, and you had better take care". After some time Peter MacDonald led the Free Church pro-union contingent out of the

⁶⁸ MBFCPL, 12 September 1900.

⁶⁹ *Highland News*, 29 September 1900, 16 March 1901.

meeting stating, "I leave this meeting and let your blood be on your own conscience". MacAskill, however, persisted and requested "one word" to which the chairman replied "not one". The meeting then continued as it had been planned as a platform for an explanation of the anti-union position and an appeal for support. At the end of the meeting the chairman asked Free Church members to stand and raise a hand if they were opposed to union. "Considerably more than half of those in the body of the hall stood up". The chairman next asked for a similar expression from those present who were for union. The account tells us "there was no response". This is not surprising as most pro-union people had probably left with Peter MacDonald.⁷⁰

These events managed to get into the presbytery records but in a somewhat diluted form. The Lewis Free Church presbytery minutes recorded "with deep sorrow that a deputation of Free Church ministers ... held meetings in Stornoway and throughout the island". These ministers were "accompanied by members of this court who were favourable to their views and members of the police force". The presbytery minutes proceeded to record that "though several ministers of this court appeared at said meetings and offered in a friendly way to ask further information on certain statements advanced by those ministers, and to discuss any controverted questions raised at the meetings so that the people might have a fair opportunity of hearing" both sides. These Lewis ministers "were, however, peremptorily silenced and threatened with expulsion from the meetings in presence of their own people". Such was the presbytery's view of events and the hostility of the anti-union clergy they blamed for their unpopularity. The Lewis Free Church presbytery recorded its disapproval of this unconstitutional conduct of ministers who belonged to other presbyteries and were "responsible for such shameful and disastrous results".⁷¹

The anti-union supporters were not the only ones to import other ministers to strengthen their cause. In the first place, MacAskill, Dingwall, was one of the foremost in contributing to the disturbances in

⁷⁰ *Highland News*, 29 September 1900.

⁷¹ *MBFCPL*, 12 September 1900.

the Drill Hall if the highland press is to be believed. In addition, in October, 1900, the month of the Union, there was an impressive gathering of Free Church ministers in Lewis. These included; Revs. A. Lee, D.J. Martin, Oban, D. MacDonald, Kilmuir Easter, J. MacMillan, Ullapool, R. Dingwall, Poolewe, J. Lamont, Snizort, M. MacLennan, Edinburgh, R. MacKenzie, Maryburgh and D. MacLeod, Avoch. Most of the Lewis ministers were also in attendance. This team of Free Church ministers had been speaking throughout the country districts of Lewis, explaining to the people the benefits of union. Their number is perhaps a reflection of the concern which they felt about the state of religion in Lewis as they approached the Union. Dr Charles MacRae, Free Church elder and son of Rev. William MacRae, Barvas who remained in the Established Church in 1843, also suggested that the "union question was causing a great deal of anxiety in Lewis, more so than in any other place".⁷²

This assembled company agreed with Donald John Martin who said that the "Free Church was taking all its distinctive principles into the Union without adding anything or detracting anything".⁷³ They were, however, having some difficulty in getting this message over to the people. This gathering of Free Church deputies were deeply concerned about the outcome in Lewis. The presbytery records expressed similar anxiety because there were "misgivings in the minds of many of the Free Church people that they cannot enter the Union to be consummated ... without sacrificing their distinctive Free Church principles". This concern over the mood of the people is further demonstrated in the presbytery's overture to the general assembly. They suggested that the assembly "make an authoritative declaration that Free Church people who may enter the Union carry all their distinctive Free Church principles with them".⁷⁴

A leading Lewis elder, Dr Ross from Barvas, described some of the problems that the approaching union was causing in Lewis. "Already we have had some experience in Lewis of what this ill-advised agitation

⁷² *Highland News*, 27 October 1900.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *MBFCPL*, 17 October 1900.

brings forth – some of our office-bearers and people driven out of the church, some of our ministers cruelly and shamefully boycotted, some of them so slandered and harassed as to wish to leave their beloved people and island and some of them, if not all, seriously hampered in their master's work".⁷⁵

The Post Union Free Church in Lewis

As well as the visiting ministers, Hector Cameron also held meetings throughout Lewis in October 1900. He spoke at a number of places and it was reported that there were large attendances wherever he went. On 31 October, 1900, Cameron was the only Lewis Free Church minister who did not move into the United Free Church. In a short biography of Cameron, Murdo MacAulay said that "the splendid cohesion of the Free Church people who so faithfully followed him was the finest tribute that could have been paid to a minister of Jesus Christ".⁷⁶ It is perhaps debatable whether Cameron's decision was central or incidental in the decision of the people but certainly the great majority of the Free Church members and adherents who remained outside the Union had high regard for Cameron and valued his teaching.

In the March issue of the *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* there was a report on conditions in Lewis. This report was also included in the *Highland News*.⁷⁷ The report claimed that the overwhelming majority of the people in Lewis remain "firm and loyal followers in the first steps of the illustrious founders of their church as constituted in 1843". The report commended the people for submitting quietly "to the grievous wrong of being extruded from their church buildings, which they themselves have erected with their hard earnings". The Free Church report also produced some rough figures indicating United Free adherence in Lewis.

In Lochs, with a population of 4,000, 100 adhered to the United Free Church. In Carloway, population of 2,000, about 60 were

⁷⁵ *Highland News*, 15 September 1900.

⁷⁶ M. MacAulay, *Hector Cameron of Lochs and Back*, (Edinburgh, 1982), 40.

⁷⁷ *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, (MRFCS), March 1901; *Highland News*, 16 March 1901.

following the United Free Church. In Shawbost the population was around 1,000 and only the minister's family and one or two individuals have joined the United Free. The Barvas congregation was 1,800 and from this the United Free Church had 80 adherents. In Ness the congregation was 1,800 and between 100-120 were described as "following the minister". The Knock congregation was 2,000 and from this 100 were also described as following Mr MacLeod. Finally, the report mentions the Stornoway Gaelic congregation in which 100 had joined the United Free Church.⁷⁸

According to these sources no more than 600 people went across to the United Free Church. The Free Church figures, however, had ignored the two congregations where most of the people entered the Union. These were Uig and Stornoway English with congregations somewhere in the region of 600 and 400 respectively.⁷⁹ This figure includes both members and adherents over the age of eighteen. A rough estimate of the numbers that joined the United Free Church can thus be obtained by combining the numbers in the *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* with the congregations of Uig and Stornoway English. This gives a figure of about 1,600 who joined the United Free Church.

Most of the church property also remained with the Free Church following the 1905 settlement. The following properties were allocated to the Free Church; Back, Barvas, Carloway, Cross manse, Kinloch, Knock, Lochs, Park, Shawbost, and Stornoway Gaelic. The Cross church which was held under a different arrangement, also remained the property of the Free Church. In the parish of Uig the church and mission house at Bernera went to the Free Church and the Uig properties to the United Free Church. Finally, the Stornoway English properties went into the Union.

In the parish of Uig there was a division which was broadly represented by Uig and Bernera. Uig people mostly joined the United Free Church and Bernera people remained Free Church. This division reflected a recent congregational dispute over the calling of a minister.

⁷⁸ *Highland News*, 16 March 1901.

⁷⁹ *MBFCPL*, 27 March 1895.

The parish of Uig had been divided for two years over the call to Rev. Roderick MacLean, Prince Edward Island. Those in favour of MacLean, the “MacLeanites”, had rejected a number of candidates and had “stuck tenaciously to the man of their choice”. The Lewis presbytery, however, declined to sustain the call because of the disharmony in the parish. The opposition to MacLean, though not confined to the island of Bernera, was strongest there. On one occasion when the presbytery were trying to settle the matter it seemed “as if the MacLeanites were to have it all their own way for the day was so boisterous that no boat could face the Sound so that the Bernera people were conspicuous by their absence”.⁸⁰

On this occasion the presbytery felt that they could not proceed with this business given that a substantial portion of the parish were absent. Unable to resolve this dispute the presbytery referred the question to the general assembly. A Free Church Commission eventually recommended dropping MacLean and suggested that the Uig people should make a fresh start in electing a new minister.

Following the Union, the first recorded meeting of the Lewis Free Church presbytery was on 18 December 1900. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hector Cameron was appointed moderator. In sustaining the religious provision of the Free Church, Cameron was assisted by elders, missionaries and catechists. In the June 1903 issue of the *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* it was reported that Lewis had sixteen catechists and lay-agents working for the Free Church.⁸¹ In addition the Lewis Free Church presbytery made maximum use of visiting ministers by agreeing that “any Free Church minister coming to the island should be granted the power and authority of moderator of session for the purpose of presiding at meetings of kirk sessions and baptising when necessary”.⁸²

The minister of Park, Hector Kennedy, had a very brief relationship with the United Free Church and within a few months he had returned to join Cameron in the Free Church. On 19 February 1901 it was noted

⁸⁰ *Highland News*, 15 April 1899 & 12 August 1899.

⁸¹ *MRFCs*, June 1903.

⁸² *MBFCPL*, 27 August 1901.

in the presbytery minutes that "the Rev. Hector Kennedy, Gravir, having applied for re-admission to the Free Church, the presbytery cordially agreed to transmit the application to the commission of assembly with the strongest recommendation".⁸³ The following month, the *Highland News* reported that the commission of the Free Church had met in Edinburgh and had received an application from Hector Kennedy "to be re-admitted to the Free Church and that the application was granted".⁸⁴ The Free Church in Lewis was further strengthened when on 11 March 1902, Nicol Nicolson was inducted as minister of Shawbost. The previous summer, Nicolson had spent time in Lewis preaching throughout the island. He was originally from Shawbost although had more recently been minister of Garve.

Most of the Free Church ministers that had visited Lewis, encouraging the people to stand firm in their adherence to the church of 1843, returned to Lewis after union to assist Cameron in providing for the spiritual and organisational needs of the Free Church. In February 1901, Cameron toured the west side of the island with Rev. MacLeod of Duke Street, Glasgow. They promised to return in the summer and conduct large open air meetings to explain further the union controversy. In June 1901 they both returned to the west side for what appears to have been a successful tour.

Cameron and MacLeod held large meetings at Shawbost, Carloway and beside the Barvas River. For the meeting at Carloway a large tent made out of boat sails was erected midway between Carloway and Tolsta Chaolais. A large number attended this gathering which was described as "one of the largest meetings held in Lewis since the union controversy began". The reporter who described this gathering was clearly impressed by what he witnessed. The singing was said to be transporting and the "scene was resplendent beyond description".⁸⁵

It was further reported that the preaching of Cameron and MacLeod was eagerly listened to by the whole congregation and Cameron received special praise "for ability, for lucidity and

⁸³ MBFCPL, 19 February 1901.

⁸⁴ *Highland News*, 9 March 1901.

⁸⁵ *Northern Chronicle*, 5 June 1901.

earnestness" he "excelled himself". The report claims that the people sat for hours without "the slightest inclination to move". Other church business was also dealt with on this day. The "session was constituted on the hillside while at the same time Mr MacLeod was busy baptising a large number of children in the tent". Following this Cameron and MacLeod spent the night at Garrynahine before moving on to Bernera. The Bernera people were determined not to miss this ministerial visit and sent a boat to ferry MacLeod and Cameron to the island.⁸⁶ The report concludes that the Bernera people after hearing Mr MacLeod "unanimously resolved to stand by the Free Church".

The Lewis communions were another occasion where the loyalty of the people to the Free Church was evident. In 17 February 1901 the Stornoway communion was held in the Drill Hall. The Revs. MacCulloch and Galbraith along with MacDonald, Raasay and Kennedy, Park were officiating. One press report stated that there was over 1,000 in attendance and overflow meetings were organised in the seminary and the Masonic Hall. The *Highland News* was not noted for relishing ecclesiastical division, however, their reporter was impressed with the vitality of the remnant Free Church in Stornoway and noted that "this great assemblage evidences the enthusiasm of the Lewis people towards Free Church principles".⁸⁷

The Lochs Free Church congregation were the first to build a new church. This was opened on 25 February 1901 with over 1,000 people in attendance and overflow space needed. The same accommodation difficulties were experienced at the Lochs communion celebrated on 24 March 1901.⁸⁸ On this occasion both the United Free Church and the public school were used for overflow purposes. At this communion Revs. MacDonald, Raasay, Kennedy, Park and MacKinnon, Gairloch were present. The Knock communion was held on 7 April 1901 with over 2,000 attending. This congregation was led by Mr MacLeod, the Point catechist and was described as "one of the largest and most important in the island, numbering over 2,000 adherents to the Free

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Highland News*, 23 February 1901.

⁸⁸ *Highland News*, 13 April 1901; *MRFCS*, May 1901.

Church and they are most loyal in support of the cause of religion".⁸⁹ This congregation did not manage to persuade the United Free to let them have use of the church for this occasion. A new building was opened on 17 September 1902 for the Knock Free Church. Rev. Donald MacLean, who was later to become principal and professor at the Free Church College, preached at the opening of the new building. A church in Barvas was also built within a few years of the Union.

Conflict

By 1900 Lewis churchmen were aware that the proposed union would bring about further conflict within the Free Church. One entry in the presbytery records demonstrates the pro-union clergy's awareness of their growing unpopularity. They acknowledged that the people are now turned against their pastors and elders who are favourable to the Union and "refuse to listen to anything they have to say in defence of their position, declining to give their stated contribution to the funds and schemes of the church and threaten to sever their connection with the church".⁹⁰

Shortly after the Union, Rev. MacLeod, Knock, wrote to the highland press describing what he and his United Free ministerial colleagues were up against. MacLeod said the United Free were frequently misrepresented by the Free Church people. "Among these was the carrying about from house to house of a Bible in which from a bookbinder's overlook, if not by malicious extraction, some leaves were missing". Other accounts referred to the Bible being used in the United Free Church as the speckled Bible or the polychrome Bible. MacLeod also claimed another misrepresentation circulating was that "the Bible was not taught in the Board schools since the Union".⁹¹

Rev. MacDougall said that this was also happening in Lochs and he also claimed that intimidation was keeping islanders away from the United Free Church. Communicants who had joined the United Free "were warned that if they persevered in attending the church services

⁸⁹ *Highland News*, 7 April 1901; *MRFCS*, May 1900.

⁹⁰ *MBFCPL*, 17 October 1900.

⁹¹ *Highland News*, 22 December 1900.

very few would give them credit".⁹² Also Rev. Morrison, minister of Barvas, spoke of two men who had said they would not come to the United Free Church for fear of their neighbours. The United Free ministers claimed that intimidation was being freely employed throughout Lewis. In many areas outside Stornoway the United Free felt themselves to be under attack and ostracised. They were denied credit, intimidated in various ways and in some cases had their doors marked with red paint.

Despite their poor standing in Lewis and their sense of being isolated within the community the United Free Church attempts to win over the Lewis people continued after the Union in October 1900. These attempts were ridiculed and resented by the Free Church. United Free ministers toured the island in November 1900. Rev. MacDonald, Kilmuir, Skye preached throughout the island. His meetings were announced in the day schools which particularly incensed Free Church opinion. Following MacDonald, MacKay, Tiree, made a circuit of the Lewis congregations. From the Free Church position all these attempts to unsettle the Lewis people were unsuccessful. The United Free Church failed to capture the Lewis people from their "attachment and loyalty to the dear old Free Church of their own and their father's affection, to be unified with a motley crew of voluntaries and higher critics".⁹³

Reports also got into the press that before the Union the Free Church had complained that a tactic of Lewis ministers was to avoid discussion of union and keep discussion of this from their people. This meant that, among the ministers, Hector Cameron was left to agitate the question and appear as a disruptive element in presbytery.⁹⁴ This suspicion is confirmed by Lee's instruction to highland ministers not to discuss union as this would only provoke opposition. Lee had written to Rainy saying that "it is clear that if friends of union keep quiet and avoid overtures and discussions in our presbyteries we will not have a single overture against union before next Assembly". Lee was of the

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Northern Chronicle*, 5 June 1901.

⁹⁴ *Highland News*, 17 November 1900.

opinion that discussion of the union question would only “unsettle our people” and would result in discussion and division at the Assembly.⁹⁵

In the 1901 United Free Assembly, Peter MacDonald reported on the Revivals taking place in the Lewis congregations of Uig, Ness and Kinloch. He also complained that the Uig congregation was being “disturbed over the union question by the visit of men who felt strongly on the subject”.⁹⁶ MacDonald accounted for the divisions by saying that they “were occasioned by the perverted representations of it made by men who ought to know better”.⁹⁷

Undoubtedly, all was not hostility and intimidation, but these more negative characteristics have consistently proved more newsworthy. Nevertheless some moderate and considerate behaviour was recorded. In Garrabost the anti-unionists sent a telegram to Superintendent Smith in Stomoway requesting his presence. They then asked him how they should proceed in order to obtain possession of the church, as apparently Rev. MacLeod refused to consider joint possession and alternate Sunday use. The Superintendent gave little advice beyond don’t break the law and resort to forcible possession. This advice they followed. A similar request was made by the Lochs congregation who received the same advice and adopted the same response. In Lochs the Free Church people quickly set about building a new church and in Garrabost the eventual outcome with regard to church accommodation appeared more comical than hostile.

In a series of articles James Shaw Grant described how the Free Church built a wooden church alongside the United Free church that they were now denied access to. After the House of Lord’s decision the Free Church took possession of the original church but would not rent the wooden one to the ousted United Frees. The United Frees then built a corrugated iron church beside the two buildings of the Free Church and later a stone building beside that. So that four churches then stood

⁹⁵ A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland, 1874-1900* (Edinburgh, 1978), 315.

⁹⁶ *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland, 1901*, (Edinburrgh, 1901), 315.

⁹⁷ *Inverness Courier*, 9 November 1900.

along the road where previously only one had existed.⁹⁸

Still in Garrabost, MacLeod, the United Free minister returned home one day to find his corn had been cut and stacked by anti-unionists who considered themselves still on the best of terms with the minister.⁹⁹ Accounts such as those above suggest that Prof. MacInnes' comment that church seizure was a "particular feature of evangelical guerrilla activity in the Hebrides" should be treated with caution.¹⁰⁰ Presumably Prof. MacInnes is referring to the events at Ness, but this was not typical and was advised against by the Free Church leadership on the island.

The Ness dispute was over church possession in which the ability to negotiate a settlement broke down and force was used to take possession of the church. A detailed and lively account of these events has been provided by James Shaw Grant¹⁰¹ and the highland press contains many letters on this subject from the participants. Yet it remains a complex area of claim and counter claim.

The attempt to arrive at a suitable arrangement for the mutual use of the church broke down in February 1901 when a Free Church crowd took the church keys from the church officer. One account claimed that about 700 anti-unionists took forcible possession of the Cross church, roughly pushed the minister and worshippers out, took the keys and occupied the church.¹⁰² A subsequent letter to the *Highland News* denied this version of events. At the point when negotiations broke down the United Free minister, MacDonald, was in possession of the church and claimed that he had offered terms for the joint use of the Cross church to the Free Church majority. On the other hand the Free Church claimed that six approaches were made to MacDonald requesting that he consider their requests for the use of the church. Free Church people also said that MacDonald had been warned that the

⁹⁸ J.S. Grant, "In Search of Lewis", *Stornoway Gazette*, 10 June 1989.

⁹⁹ *Highland News*, 5 October 1901.

¹⁰⁰ A.I. MacInnes, "Evangelical Protestantism in the Nineteenth Century Highlands", in *Sermons and Battle Hymns, Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, edd. G. Walker and T. Gallagher (Edinburgh 1990), 64.

¹⁰¹ J.S. Grant, "In Search of Lewis".

¹⁰² *Highland News*, 23 February 1901.

Ness people were becoming impatient and restless and many wanted to take the building by force.¹⁰³ MacDonald denied this version of events.

Following these events the church building remained in the hands of the Free Church. By July, Rev. MacDonald, appealed to the civil powers to re-open the Cross church and to "suggest arrangements for its joint use". This involved the suggestion that the keys should be passed to the police and then to the United Free church officer in Cross. This did not take place. With no keys produced, a small party consisting of the Sheriff Officer, Police, Rev. MacDonald and a tradesman arrived to open the church. A crowd of about 100 barred their way to the door and the sheriff who was denied access was unable to carry out his duty. He returned to Stornoway and seven men from Ness were charged. Six were convicted and fined £10 each. This provoked an angry reaction in Ness. When police arrived to change the locks in December 1901 they had to take refuge in the church until they managed to negotiate a safe departure from Cross. These disturbances were met with the despatch of a warship and a number of mainland police to secure order in what was considered to be a troubled community.

There were a number of additional disturbances in Ness. Both the police station and the United Free Church manse were reported to have been attacked by stone-throwing crowds. Some of the elders who joined the United Free Church had barley and corn stacks set alight. The minister was also singled out for attack and abuse. There are stories which describe his windows being smashed in the night and large stones landing on the bed where he was sleeping. Ness people also refer to an attempted attack on the United Free minister. Slightly different versions of this incident exist. One account describes how a group of men were planning to attack the minister as he made his way home one night. As the men were about to do him harm a bright light surrounded MacDonald and the men were unable to carry out their deed. Another account of the same incident is not quite so dramatic and attributes MacDonald's escape to a horse and cart rather than supernatural illumination.

¹⁰³ *Highland News*, 13 April 1901.

The Ness people, both Free Church and United Free, made much use of the highland press to present their versions of the events in Ness. Their accounts are fascinating but frustrating in terms of establishing the sequence of events. There was even disagreement over the financial contribution that Free Church and United Free had previously made to the Ness church. After he entered the Union, MacDonald, Cross, claimed, "those who paid highest in the church are with us, and that the great majority of those who follow them [Free Church], paid nothing in it or next to nothing".¹⁰⁴ This was directly challenged by Murdo Gunn, who before 1900 had been collector of church funds for the Ness Free Church congregation. With reference to the Ness Church, Gunn said it had cost £2,400 and over £1,800 had been paid. Of that £1,800 the anti-unionists had paid over £1,600 and those presently in the Union had only paid over £100.¹⁰⁵ Disagreements such as this were typical of the debate in Ness.

In 1874 Rainy wrote a pamphlet on a Bill going through parliament on the subject of Church Patronage in Scotland. He referred to the injustice of a minority church being regarded as a national institution. Concerning the Established Church he argued "in numerous Highland parishes no sensible difference would be made by its entire and immediate disappearance". In support of this, Rainy provided a table listing eight areas of Lewis showing population and adherence to the Free Church and other churches. The result overwhelmingly favoured the Free Church. Out of a population of 23,439, Rainy claimed 22,979 were Free Church adherents. In this, Rainy was not alone in referring to the loyalty of the Lewis people to the Free Church.¹⁰⁶ It was a frequent theme of Free Church rhetoric. Following 1900, however, this argument was no longer available to those who formed the leadership of the United Free Church. The following section will return to the question of why a minority of the Free Church followed their ministers

¹⁰⁴ *Highland News*, 11 May 1901.

¹⁰⁵ *Highland News*, 16 November 1901.

¹⁰⁶ R. Rainy, *Report of the Committee on Legislation Regarding Patronage*, Free Church Pamphlet No XXXII, (1874), 7.

into the United Free Church and the great majority remained Free Church.

The Disruptive Union

In "Church and Creed" Kenneth Ross argues that "it can scarcely be doubted that theological developments were material to the division which characterised Free Church life towards the end of the nineteenth century and which led to the separation of 1900".¹⁰⁷ With regard to events in Lewis, I would like to question the degree to which this accurately reflects the divisions that took place in Lewis at the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1900, in Lewis, we do not find two distinct theological groups. At a national level two broad groups existed, constitutionalists and advanced. These were not the same as anti-union and pro-union. At points the categories of constitutionalist and advanced are of little use in explaining the Union as many who were regarded as constitutionalists entered the Union. There was, of course, a division in Lewis in 1900 but little division of ideas and beliefs. The actions of the Lewis people and the decisions of the presbytery all display a consistent constitutionalist position.

As Union approached, Dr Ross, a leading Free Church elder from Barvas, Lewis, was quoted in the *Highland News* as saying "though I do not approve of Union, though I do not approve of the steps taken in connection with Union. I say that as a Free-Churchman, I submit to the supreme court of my church. I deny myself for the sake of peace". Dr Ross was deeply grieved at the seemingly unavoidable division facing Lewis. He spoke as one tired of controversy and deeply alarmed at the possible consequences of further religious division. Ross argued that the Union is "mostly a lowland and southern affair and won't affect the Highlands and Lewis". In response to his own question of "what appreciable difference would it make ecclesiastically among us?" He answered "practically none". Ross considered that the Union was unnecessary. "We in the North might prefer that both churches should

¹⁰⁷ K. Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland, The Free Church Case, 1900-1904 and Its Origins* (Edinburgh, 1988), 216.

still continue labouring and testifying as before". Yet he appealed to Lewis people to enter the Union and to deny themselves and their preferences for the sake of peace.¹⁰⁸

In Lewis Dr Ross was not alone in disapproving of Union yet joining the United Free Church. In Knock and Barvas it was claimed that those who joined the United Free Church did so on the basis of loyalty to the minister alone. The Barvas people who joined the United Free Church were described as "personal followers of the minister, while they discard the new church and its tenets". Similarly in Knock, there were "about 100 or thereby following Mr MacLeod but opposed professedly to the Union",¹⁰⁹ and again in Peter MacDonald's Stornoway congregation we find a report claiming that "several office bearers in this congregation were pronounced anti-unionists and had declared their determination not to enter the united church", but some joined.¹¹⁰

Thus many who went into the Union disapproved of it. Ministers in Lewis were not being accused of being liberal. This could only add to the surprise and sense of betrayal, that Lewis constitutional, Gaelic-speaking, evangelical ministers should want to throw in their lot with the predominant party in the Free Church. From Hector Cameron's point of view this must have been a great disappointment. He had shared platforms with Ross and others in previous struggles and together they had spoken against the Declaratory Act and "publicly denounced the framers of the fallacious document". But now Ross and others had been "as if by magic transmuted and have fallen helplessly among the chattels of the firm of Rainy, Hutton, Lee and Co."¹¹¹

In the mid 1870s constitutionalism was national but by the 1890s it was a highland phenomenon which involved a mixed agenda of adherence to the Westminster Confession, opposition to voluntarism and higher criticism, support for doctrinal purity, purity of worship and the innerancy of scripture. Their ideal was the Disruption Church of

¹⁰⁸ *Highland News*, 1 September 1900; 15 September 1900.

¹⁰⁹ *Highland News*, 16 March 1901.

¹¹⁰ *Inverness Courier*, 6 November 1900.

¹¹¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 5 June 1901.

1843. Many of the above points would receive different weight from different people as constitutionalism was a broad category. An important stage was the Declaratory Act which served as a focus of opposition for constitutionalists. As the Free Church moved towards union many in the highlands felt that they were being marginalised within their own church. Some of this opposition was channelled in to the Free Presbyterian schism of 1893.

The national division of constitutionalist and advanced was irrelevant to the religious culture and climate of Lewis. However, as a result of pressures from the Free Church majority, there emerged in Lewis two contending factions, pro-union and anti-union. These do not equate with constitutionalist and advanced. The pressure for change and the move towards union in the Free Church had created an unnatural division in the Free Church presbytery in Lewis. It was not a theological division. The alignments that resulted from 1893 and 1900 did not reflect the views held. Many Lewis Free Church people after 1893 remained bitterly opposed to the Declaratory Act and in 1900 many Free Church constitutionalists in Lewis and throughout the highlands entered the Union. Ideas and theological background cannot explain these divisions; other social groupings must be considered to explain the events of 1900.

So, why did the Lewis people remain with the Free Church in 1900? In answering this question it is essential to reflect on the profound impact that evangelicalism had on the island of Lewis. Elsewhere I have argued that in Lewis, evangelicalism arrived through the agency of Gaelic-speaking highlanders and moved into a social context with few strong beliefs or religious structures. It arrived with education, literacy and a compelling certainty and rapidly achieved a predominant position. The initial successes of the evangelicals brought about a change in the social structure of the island, introducing a new group who quickly became the dominant social group dominant not in a material sense, but in terms of moral and intellectual leadership. The culture that resulted penetrated every family and was rigorously enforced at the grassroots level.

The evangelical legacy to the islands, mediated through the Free Church for much of the nineteenth century, therefore, consisted of a

pervasive culture, a redefinition of the social structure and the introduction of new institutions. This involved a number of things that were new to the island in the early nineteenth century but by the late nineteenth century had become a major part of the islanders' identity and self-understanding.

To all this Union was a threat. It was perceived, rightly or wrongly, that it would introduce a form of religion that would undermine the culture, social structure and institutions that most of the islanders adhered to. Given the origin and associations of the pro-union party it was not possible for union to be perceived in any other way. The pro-union Free Church was seen to have its origins in the committees and colleges of the Free Church and was associated with that party in the Free Church that was loosening its attachment to the church of 1843 and introducing belief and practice that was unacceptable to highland constitutionalism.

History and tradition were also involved in this dispute. The Lewis Free Church regarded the period, 1820s-1840s, as something approaching an evangelical golden age. The participants were regarded as exemplary characters and the principles pursued were to serve as a standard for future generations. These future generations, in turn, must never forget the benefits conferred on them by the heroic and saintly acts of their predecessors. In one trip to Lewis, Rev. Campbell, Creich, encouraged Lewis anti-unionists to stand firm saying "if they were wrong, they were wrong in the company of great men and honourable men".¹¹²

In the 1890s Lewis was living in the shadow of these times. The elevation of these times and the veneration of these characters served to teach the values of that culture and to affirm the social arrangements that currently prevailed. Union again, was perceived as threat to this tradition. Pro-union spirituality was considered to be contrary to the faith of the Lewis evangelical founding-fathers and would not sustain the culture and institutions which they had produced.

Why then did islanders remain Free Church? Was theology important? In part, but only to the extent that it shaped island culture

¹¹² *Highland News*, 29 September 1900.

and social structure. Was being a Gaelic-speaking highlander contributory? In part, but only to the extent it permitted islanders to have a distinct culture that could be shaped by evangelicalism. The islanders remained Free Church because they believed that only this commitment affirmed and sustained the culture, society and institutions which they valued and were committed to promoting.

Although ministers and people held much in common, they operated within different social contexts. This involved different pressures and resulting loyalties. Ministers were part of a circle of contacts that involved four levels of church courts, they had been educated in Free Church colleges and the church secured their livelihood and status. Within this context it was the advanced party in the Free Church that possessed status, prestige, exercised leadership and provided a focus for the aspirations of the Free Church clergy. It is unlikely that this dominance and prestige would have been without a certain amount of influence in the Free Church in the 1890s. For ministers, despite sharing similar theological views as the people, their circle of contacts carried more weight in shaping clerical attitudes than the society within which they exercised their ministry. Ministers did feel a measure of disquiet about the Edinburgh machine and its perceived detachment from the church of 1843 but in most cases this failed to undermine the influence of the Free Church leadership.

In many ways the Free Church machine had succeeded. By adhering to a new tone and temper of spirituality and relentlessly identifying this with the prestigious elites in the Free Church they had exerted pressure on ministers who were left with little alternative. There were different pressures on the Lewis people. Their spirituality was influenced by their evangelical past, the culture this had produced, the social structure it had shaped and the institutions it had created. The Free Church leadership would have had a measure of influence on Lewis people but this would not carry as much weight as the influence that resulted from their evangelical heritage.

In Lewis, people and ministers held many beliefs in common yet operated within different social contexts. This influenced their decisions. The actions of the Free Church leadership successfully exploited this division and pulled people and ministers in different

directions. To a great extent views and attitudes were shaped by the ideology and values of the group to which people belonged or aspired to. For the people this was the evangelical community in the island, for ministers it was the leadership of the Free Church. Ministers' views on union were, therefore, largely shaped by the social context that they operated within. Lewis ministers had helped create and sustain the ideology of the evangelical community and as they still shared the same beliefs as islanders their own efforts had ironically contributed to the loss of their own congregations.

The movement towards union was disruptive of the consensus that existed in Lewis. As the Free Church moved towards union it created in Lewis a largely irrelevant division. Pro-union and anti-union had more in common with each other in Lewis than they did with those with whom they had made common cause in other parts of Scotland. In Lewis the path towards Union created twenty-eight congregations where only eleven Free Church congregations had existed in 1892. For Lewis it was a disruptive union. They were caught up in events at a national level. The agenda was set elsewhere and the Lewis Free Church, having much in common, tragically suffered the consequences.

